

**Testimony to the Appropriations Committee
Deficit Mitigation Hearing
Thursday, March 11, 2010**



Diane Randall, Executive Director, Partnership for Strong Communities

Representative Geragosian, Sen. Harp, honored members of the Committee,

I am Diane Randall, executive director of the Partnership for Strong Communities, a statewide housing policy organization that engages civic and political support to solve homelessness, create affordable housing and develop strong, vibrant communities.

I am here today to strongly oppose two proposed reductions in Gov. Rell's deficit mitigation package.

The first would cut the Housing and Homeless Services line item in the DSS budget as part of a recommended cut of \$6.2 million to non-entitlement programs. This line item includes the Rental Assistance Program as well domestic violence shelters, emergency shelters, HIV/AIDS housing, eviction prevention; in short, it provides partial funding for last stop programs that serve extremely low income people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including families with young children.

Rental assistance is a vital tool for a whole range of housing challenges. For someone needing an affordable place to live, a RAP certificate can immediately move a family from homelessness to a stable home; it can be the ticket to independent living from costly institutional or emergency care. Particularly for people who are homeless, disabled or elderly, RAPs provide the key to security, independence and community life.

We are at a point where the affordable rental housing situation in Connecticut couldn't get much worse: 100,000 of the 400,000 renting households in the state currently make less than 50% of median income and spend more than half that limited income on housing. A smidgen of these households may receive short term assistance for 3 months through the federal stimulus HPRP funding (Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing), and all of those households could benefit from a RAP or voucher to prevent homelessness and stabilize their household. When the program last opened 3 years ago, DSS received nearly 50,000 applications, and screened 4,000 households onto the list for the 1,650 RAPs.

Meanwhile, our vacancy rate on units produced with Low Income Housing Tax Credit dollars was 3.7% at the end of 2008, compared to more than 10% nationwide. We have lost thousands of rental units in the last decade. A RAP certificate, or a Sect. 8 voucher, is the only thing that can keep many of the individuals and families out of emergency shelters. They are, I might add, at 100% of

capacity. If we lose the meager resources we have to address housing problems, where will the very low income households turn? New emergency shelters? Encampments in the woods or on vacant lots? Filling up beds in nursing homes we're trying to close down? J

I am also here to strong oppose Gov. Rell's proposal to eliminate the \$1.7 million remaining in the HOMEConnecticut account at OPM, which will eviscerate the program.

HOMEConnecticut has achieved enormous success, sparking interest from half of our towns and cities. Fifty municipalities have received planning grants to determine where they would create housing density in their communities as a way to support effective growth; another 20-30 towns would have applied for these planning grants if the pipeline of applications hadn't been cut off. Two towns have finished planning and applied to OPM for approval of their Incentive Housing Zones. Another 6-8 are likely to apply for IHZ approvals this year. We finally have an affordable and mixed-income housing program that the towns like and want to use.

Why would we cut it?

Sweeping clean the HOMEConnecticut account could mortally wound the state's chances of attracting and leveraging federal dollars under the new Sustainable Communities Initiative. This new federal program – a forward-looking collaboration by HUD, DOT and EPA – will provide funds to “willing” states and regions that are working to proactively create sustainable communities. Connecticut can demonstrate its leadership through HOMEConnecticut. If you cut the program now, the federal government will read that as a retreat from the huge progress this General Assembly has made.

In addition, if the state retreats, towns that have, in good faith, gone through a planning process for the creation of higher density, affordable homes lose faith. Scores of town leaders and citizen leaders have committed time, resources and political capital to the planning process that finally make steps to addressing our state's housing affordability problems. It is wrong to pull the rug out from under them now, after they've made huge progress.

It also doesn't make sense -- at a time the state is looking to grow industry and reverse an outmigration of skilled, educated young workers -- to take away the first housing creation tool that towns have used in years. We have lost more 25-34-year-old population than any state since 1990. We need to grow our population in smart ways, provide housing options for teachers, police, firefighters, our parents, our children, our workers, our young professionals so we can grow jobs – and the governor's proposal would turn back the clock on the progress we've made.

Please don't turn back the clock.

Thank you.